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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the A+ Schools Program that contains financial incentives to encourage districts to pursue three goals: (1) All students will graduate from high school; (2) all students will complete a selection of studies that is challenging and has identified learning expectations; and (3) all students will proceed from graduation to a college or postsecondary vocational or technical school or a high-wage job with workplace skill-development opportunities. The district can receive up to $450,000 over a 3-year period for such things as technology, software, curriculum, and professional development. Following the end of the 3 year period, the district must document that the high school has stopped offering a general education track, developed an ongoing school/community partnership, and provided evidence that the number of dropouts has decreased. With substantial progress toward these objectives, the high school can be designated an "A+ High School." The paper illustrates a case study of a high school that strives to maintain these goals. (Contains 11 references.) (DFR)

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Missouri's A+ Schools:

A Legislative Attempt to Stimulate High School Reform

Like many states, Missouri has attempted to legislate school improvement. The latest effort, *The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993* (Senate Bill 380, section 14), requires a revision of curriculum frameworks, a change in assessment instrumentation, and a change in the state school classification system from a process model to a student outcomes model. These efforts to standardize curriculum and emphasize student outcomes as the primary criterion for measuring schools are a common legislative response to the pressure to improve schools. Most legislative attempts to mandate school improvement are framed on at least three false assumptions: 1) all schools are failing, 2) all schools are alike, and 3) coercion works.

Distinctive to Senate Bill 380, is the inclusion of Missouri's A+ Schools Program. The A+ Schools Program (Robison, 1995) offers competitive grants driven by three goals: all students will graduate from high school, all students will complete a selection of studies that is challenging and has identified learning expectations, and all students will proceed from high school graduation to a college or post-secondary vocational or technical school or a high-wage job with workplace skill development opportunities.

The A+ Schools Program contains financial incentives to encourage districts to pursue these goals. The district can receive up to $450,000.00 over a three-year period for such things as technology, software, curriculum, and professional development. At the end of the three-year period, the district must document that the high school has stopped offering a general education track, developed an ongoing school/community partnership, and provided evidence that the number of dropouts has decreased. If

substantial progress toward these objectives can be documented, the high school can be designated as an "A+ High School".

Most state legislated efforts at reform leave the student out of the equation. Missouri's A+ schools program does not. Special financial assistance is provided to qualified graduates of "A+ High Schools". State reimbursement for the cost of tuition, books, and fees are provided for eligible graduates who continue their education in Missouri community colleges or vocational-technical schools. To be eligible for this funding the student must attend an A+ School for three consecutive years, earn at least a 2.5 grade point average, have at least 95% attendance, and perform 50 hours of unpaid mentoring for younger students.

A Vision of Reform

A case study illustrates. CCHS is a relatively small high school in Missouri. Located 25 miles south of St. Louis, the availability of employment and the attractiveness of the community encourage graduates to return and raise their families. Consequently, from 1994-1999 enrollment remained stable and ranged from 260 to 300 students. Residents have a long history of supporting what many believe are excellent public schools and CCHS had always received top state rankings. However, a 1993 Missouri School Improvement Review, a legislatively mandated classification review conducted in five-year intervals, challenged these illusions. The review demonstrated several areas of concern and jolted administrators, students and parents from their complacency. Two of the most pressing of these concerns were average daily attendance had decreased to 89 percent and the dropout rate had risen to 10 percent. It was clear that unless

improvements were made before the next review in 1998 CCHS would lose its valued top state ranking.

To address the concerns identified by the 1993 state review, the high school principal and a committee of teachers and students set the following goals: improve the average daily attendance to 95%, and reduce the dropout rate to less than 5%. Using these goals as a framework, the committee began the process of making application for the A+ Program as a funding source. After much discussion and investigation, the committee concluded that the issues of attendance and dropout rates were interrelated. An analysis of the dropout data from the previous five years determined students did not drop because these students could not meet the academic expectations. Rather, the study found that a significant percentage of these students were academically capable. However, the majority of these students were enrolled in lower track courses. Exit interviews with students in the process of dropping out revealed that they had little idea about the kinds of career opportunities that were available. These students did not make the connection between what they were doing in school and their future. Many of these students did not have long-range career goals or were very unrealistic about the employment opportunities available to them. Further, the high school's attendance policy was failing to improve attendance. It was hypothesized that the only true way to improve attendance and achievement was to improve curriculum and instruction and create a more challenging, engaging and imaginative approach to teaching and learning.

An A+ Winner

In the summer of 1996, it was announced that CCHS was one of 30 high schools awarded a three-year A+ grant. It was clear that the Board of Education and the public

expected great things from the school. To meet the challenge, we decided to focus on four areas of school organization and culture: use of time, curriculum and instruction, the integration of technology with teaching and learning, and the connection of courses to future plans.

Use of time

Breaking Ranks (NASSP, 1996) recommends that schools develop flexible scheduling plans to better utilize time. It is well known that the traditional high school schedule of six or seven periods of 50-55 minutes in length, five days per week for 35-36 weeks per school year, has remained virtually unchanged for the past 70 years. However, the traditional schedule presents several problems. The traditional schedule limits instructional possibilities for teachers, does not permit flexible time for teaching and learning, and is not particularly user friendly for teachers or students (Canady & Rettig, 1996).

The committee concluded that this generally acknowledged design flaw (Canady & Rettig, p. 8, 1996; Carroll, 1994b; NASSP, 1996), if not addressed, would stymie any improvement efforts. Therefore, we began to re-examine the traditional schedule. An alternative schedule should not be an end in itself, but should be developed as part of an overall plan to address the identified needs of a particular school. After much exploration, the committee elected to implement an alternating day 10-block schedule (Hackmann & Waters, 1998). The alternating day 10-block schedule consists of five 72-minute periods every other day. Therefore, students could enroll in ten courses in an academic year rather that the traditional seven. This change in schedule created the flexibility to implement other reforms considered by the committee.

Curriculum and Instruction

According to Canady and Rettig, teachers who successfully use block scheduling move away from the introduction/lecture/ review format that is common in most schools and utilize a variety of ways to present material. Students are capable of concentrating for longer periods, but the class structure must change every 20 to 30 minutes to facilitate student engagement. By varying lessons, teachers can present material to a diverse population of students with numerous learning styles. For example, block scheduling often encourages teachers to use cooperative learning. In addition, teachers can use a variety of other learning activities to foster critical thinking and active learning and help students learn to become responsible for more than a simple regurgitation of facts (1996).

Tracking

One of the requirements of the A+ grant is the elimination of lower track courses from the curriculum. This requirement generated almost as much discussion as changing the schedule. However, ability grouping does not motivate anyone to attend regularly and make his or her best effort (Wheelock, p. 11, 1994: Oakes & Lipton, 1992). At this point, the committee was forced to face an uncomfortable truth. How can we expect improvement when we communicate to many students that they are not worthy of our best efforts and are not capable of learning as well as other students? The assumption that students in the lower track courses could achieve in a traditional curriculum required a great leap of faith.

However, after much discussion, the committee decided to eliminate tracking in the high school to the greatest extent practical. The addition of a two-year algebra curriculum and an applied geometry course were the only adjustments made. However,

when these math courses are combined with increased graduation requirements in English and science, all graduates complete, at the minimum, a basic college preparatory curriculum.

Technology

One of the concerns of the community and the Board of Education was the lack of computer technology in the high school. The A+ grant provided significant funding to address this concern. For students to remain competitive, they must understand how technology can be used as a learning tool, not just entertainment. Therefore, we began with the proposition that technology should not be an add-on. Rather technology should be integrated into teaching and learning, the very fabric of the school.

The committee elected to meet the challenge of integrating technology with teaching and learning in four ways: require a computer application course for all freshmen, provide ongoing professional development for teachers, make technology available in the classroom, and develop classroom size computer laboratories for teacher/student use.

Relating School to the Future

Our review of dropout and attendance data, exit interviews with seniors, and one and five year follow-up surveys of graduates indicate that many students did not find a purpose in the courses they took in high school. To address these issues, we began to explore career pathways (Edwards, Jr. 1995: Waters & Hackmann, 1998: Adkisson & Lane, 1995). Career pathways consist of clusters of occupations and careers grouped by similar skills and aptitudes. A menu of courses is developed for each pathway that relates

to that career choice and prepares the student for post-secondary training or entry into the job market.

In the CCHS career pathway model, the foundations in language arts, mathematics, computer skills, and social studies are built during the first two years of high school. During the second year of high school, each student develops a two-year curriculum plan, or pathway, that leads to post-secondary training or employment. Students entering a particular career field select courses based on their career path. There is much overlap between the course selection of most career pathways, and students are free to change pathways at any time.

Conclusions

Our experience with restructuring has lead to several conclusions.

- Block scheduling, in and of itself, may not result in systemic change. However, what block scheduling can do is create conflict with existing beliefs, practices, and values and serve as a vehicle for change. If curriculum and instruction do not change, than block scheduling is a solution without a problem.
- Implementing block scheduling is a two-year project that requires laying the groundwork with teachers, students, and the community. Part of the planning process is anticipating the financial requirements of the change in schedules. Teacher training must be planned, financed and supported. Most importantly, when changing to block scheduling, things do get worse for students and teachers before they get better.
- The elimination of tracking was the most difficult of our efforts and created the greatest risk. Tracking is insidious and efforts to eliminate tracking, even to some extent, are often vigorously opposed by the parents of high achieving students

(Loveless, 1999, Kohn, 1998). These efforts are also opposed, though not as publicly, by teachers of higher ability students. Consequently, it is necessary to carefully build community and teacher support for these efforts (Kohn, 1998).

- We also believed that we should not eliminate college bound or advanced courses. The elimination of these courses does not help anyone. Our efforts focused on the elimination of remedial courses and the strengthening of regular courses in the freshman and sophomore year. Advanced and college prep courses were left essentially in the junior and senior year where students began to select electives based on interest and future plans, not placed in these courses by some other method. Our intent was to level the playing field and increase the number of students who could choose to enroll in advanced or college courses.
- The development of career pathways can also lead to community opposition in terms of the 'school-to-work' debate. Most career pathway programs start in the junior high or freshman years. We decided to resist this temptation. Students did not have an official 'pathway' until the end of their sophomore year. These efforts seemed to blunt the fear of many that schools are 'tracking' students into certain occupations at the request of the government.

Summary

Changes at CCHS were a direct result of concerns to provide a quality education for all students. Without the funding from the A+ Grant, the influx of technology would not have been possible and the change to block scheduling, career pathways, and the elimination of tracking would have been much more difficult. However, not all change is

progress. The goals of the school focused on performance data, and these changes can be measured only by improvements in these areas.

Although student achievement, attendance, and dropout rates are usually not affected by short-term events, the 1997-98 and 1998-99 data demonstrated an average daily attendance of 93% and a dropout rate decrease to 3%. The percentage of students scoring in the bottom quintile of the state test decreased by over 50% in 1997.

In November of 1998, the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) committee returned for a scheduled five-year reevaluation. The 1993 review established several areas of concern, particularly in student performance. In contrast, 1998 results showed CCHS had met or exceeded minimum performance standards on ten of the eleven criteria used to evaluate student performance data. One month later, after a comprehensive review by a state A+ team, CCHS became an "A+ High School". These reviews confirmed that CCHS was on the right track.

The success of CCHS is an example of how an innovative legislative program can encourage and nurture school improvement. Missouri's A+ Schools Program sets high standards, but for the high schools that are successful in the application process, it also provides financial incentives for both the district and the student to succeed. Of more importance, the process encourages innovation rather than regimentation. Each A+ School is encouraged to address its own needs and apply the funding where it is most needed. Therefore, each A+ School is distinct. It is this type of legislative program that provides the greatest opportunity for successful school improvement.

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